Religious Studies

http://journals.cambridge.org/RES

Additional services for ***Religious Studies:***

Email alerts: Click here
Subscriptions: Click here
Commercial reprints: Click here
Terms of use : Click here

The Missing Premise in the Ontological Argument

Norman L. Geisler

Religious Studies / Volume 9 / Issue 03 / September 1973, pp 289 - 296
DOI: 10.1017/S003441250000679X, Published online: 24 October 2008

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S003441250000679X

How to cite this article:
Norman L. Geisler (1973). The Missing Premise in the Ontological Argument. Religious Studies, 9, pp 289-296 doi:10.1017/S003441250000679X

Request Permissions : Click here

CAMBRIDGE JOURNALS

Downloaded from http://journals.cambridge.org/RES, IP address: 132.174.254.155 on 05 Apr 2015

Rel. Stud. **9**, *pp.* 289–296

NORMAN L. GEISLER
Professor of Philosophy of Religion, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

THE MISSING PREMISE IN THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

It appears to me that most traditional criticism of the Ontological argument misses the mark because the proponents imply a premise which, if true, would validate their argument on precisely the point attacked by the opponents. In view of this possibility, I propose the following analysis:

(1) state the traditional ontological argument without the implied premise;
(2) state the traditional criticisms, showing how they miss the mark;
(3) restate the ontological argument with the implied premise made clear;
(4) offer a defence of the implied premise;
(5) show how the ontological argument is still invalidated by another criticism;
(6) argue that the only way to avoid this other criticism is to borrow another premise from the cosmological argument, and
(7) that when these premises are borrowed the result is a valid form of the cosmological argument for the existence of a necessary being.

I. *The traditional statements of the ontological arguments*

Following a recent custom, I will state two forms of Anselm's argument. The first one is based on the *predicability* of existence to an absolutely perfect being.[1]

(1) God is by definition an absolutely perfect being.
(2) Whatever can be predicated of an absolutely perfect being must be predicated of it (otherwise it would lack some perfection it must have).
(3) Existence can be predicated of an absolutely perfect being (i.e., it is possible that such a being exists).
(4) Therefore, existence must be predicated of an absolutely perfect being.[2]

The second form of Anselm's argument is based on the *conceivability* of existence for a necessary being.

[1] The sources behind the discussion here are compiled in Alvin Plantinga (ed.), *The Ontological Argument* (New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1965).
[2] *Ibid.* pp. 3–5.

(1) The existence of a necessary being is conceivable.
(2) Whatever is conceivable of a necessary being it must necessarily have (for if it did not have it, then it would not be a *necessary* being which it is conceived to be).
(3) Therefore, a necessary being must necessarily exist.

II. *The traditional criticism of the ontological argument*

Now the first form of the ontological argument is subject to Kant's criticism that existence is not a predicate. Kant's argument can be summarised like this:[1]

(1) Whatever adds nothing to the concept of a thing is not a predicate of that thing (i.e., only characteristics are properly predicated of things).
(2) Existence adds nothing to the concept of a thing (i.e., no characteristic is added to a thing by positing it as real rather than as imagined).
(3) Therefore, existence is not a predicate of anything.
(4) But the ontological argument is invalid unless existence is a predicate.
(5) Therefore, the ontological argument is invalid.

Granting the validity of Kant's argument,[2] it applies directly only to the first form of Anselm's argument based on predicability. The second form based on the inconceivability of God's non-existence appears to avoid Kant's critique.

There is another traditional criticism of which Kant was aware which insists that conceivability does not guarantee the reality of something. This is what Gaunilo aimed at in his famous island illustration. Simply because we can conceive a perfect island does not necessitate its existence, he insisted. Aquinas argued the same point when he contended that the ontological argument proves only a *conceptual* but not an *actual* existence of God. Likewise, Caterus objected to Descartes' ontological argument on the same basis.[3] But this objection overlooks one basic point made by Anselm, Descartes and Hartshorne, viz., the ontological argument does not claim that whatever is *possible* to conceive must necessarily exist but only what is *necessary* to conceive as existing must necessarily exist.[4] Hence, to criticise the argument, because on the same basis one could argue into existence all manner of unreal objects, completely misses the point. The ontological argument holds only that existence must be predicated of that which cannot be conceived not to exist, viz., of a necessary existence. This is true of the concept of a necessary existence and of nothing else.

[1] *The Ontological Argument*, pp. 57–64.
[2] Not everyone grants the validity of Kant's criticism. See Hartshorne in Plantinga, *op. cit.* p. 129.
[3] See *ibid* pp. 11–12; 37.
[4] *Ibid.* pp. 7–8; 39, 127, 148–9.

http://journals.cambridge.org Downloaded: 05 Apr 2015 IP address: 122.174.254.155

III. *The implied premise in the ontological argument*

The opponents of the ontological argument were aiming in the right direction, even though they missed the mark. The reason for this appears to be a premise which is implied but not usually stated by the proponents of the ontological argument. And it is the viability of this premise which protects the argument against the criticism that it has made an invalid transition from the conceptual to the real. The premise is this:[1] the *rationally inescapable* is the real. The opponents mistakenly supposed that the ontological argument was built on the premise that the *rational* is the real. Let us restate the argument with the premise that logical necessity guarantees reality in order to observe how this would ward off the traditional criticism.

(1) It is rationally inescapable to conceive of a necessary being as necessarily existing (since to conceive it any other way would be contrary to what it is granted to be by its very concept).
(2) The rationally inescapable is real (i.e., what cannot be conceived otherwise must be true; the inconceivable cannot be real).
(3) Therefore, a necessary being is real.

Or, to state the argument in more complete form,

(1) It is logically possible to conceive of a necessary being as necessarily existing (i.e., there is no contradiction in such as concept).
(2) It is logically necessary to conceive of a necessary being as necessarily existing (for if it existed in any other way, then it would not be a necessary being, which it is conceived to be by definition).
(3) Whatever is logically necessary to conceive is actually true of reality.
(4) Therefore, a necessary being actually exists in reality.

Now the crucial premise, if true, defends the ontological argument against a common criticism. For the argument does not contend that mere logical *possibility* of a concept demands the reality of its object but that the logical necessity of a concept does argue for the reality of its object. In brief, the ontological argument insists that if it is necessary to *think* of God as necessarily existing (if he exists at all) and if necessary thoughts must be true, then it follows as true that God exists.

IV. *A defence of the implied premise: the rationally inescapable is real*

Not everyone accepts the truth of this implied premise. There are two central objections to the premise that the rationally inescapable is the real. First, the only way to defend the premise is by arguing that it is rationally inescapable to affirm that the rationally inescapable is real. This is a vicious

[1] Hartshorne is clearly committed to this premise when he writes, 'But in the case of God . . . we have only to exclude impossibility or meaningless to establish actuality,' *ibid.* p. 134.

http://journals.cambridge.org Downloaded: 05 Apr 2015 IP address: 132.174.254.155

circle which uses rational inescapability in order to prove rational inescapability. The second objection is that even granting that it is logically necessary to *think* of God as existing, nevertheless this might not really *be* true. That is, the laws of logic might demand a given conception, even though reality may be otherwise.

One attempt at defence against these criticism argues that the premise that logic applies to reality cannot be proved in any rational way; it is simply a *necessary belief*.[1] Unless we believe that concepts apply to reality then we cannot think about reality at all. Further, all meaning would be objectless; all meaning would be about itself rather than about any reality beyond itself. In short, there is no theoretical proof that thought applies to reality, but it is practically necessary to believe that it does.

Besides the fact that this defence leaves open the possibility that reality could be illogical or contradictory, there is another objection to defending the premise under question in this manner, viz., there seems to be a stronger argument. The argument is as follows: the rationally inescapable is real because no other position is meaningfully affirmable. In outline, there are only three possible views on the relation of logical necessity and reality: (1) logic[2] *can not* apply to reality; (2) logic *may not* apply to reality; (3) logic *must* apply to reality. We argue that the first alternative is self-defeating, the second is meaningless and, therefore, the third is the only view which is affirmable.

The first position that logic *can not* apply to reality is self-destructive, for the very statement that logic cannot apply to reality is offered as a logical (i.e., non-contradictory) statement about reality. That is, the view makes a logical statement about reality in the very claim that logic can not apply to reality. In brief, if the position is true, then it is false; it falsifies itself in the very attempt to establish itself. And to beg exception for this one statement about reality will not do. For if one non-contradictory statement can be made about reality, then reality must be subject to logic. And if reality is subject to logic, then other logical statements can be made of it too. Indeed, if reality is logical, then one must speak of it in logical terms, for all non-logical statements will not be true of a logical reality. So there is no way to deny logic of reality without affirming logic of reality in the very denial. Reality is undeniably logical.

The second view that logic *may not* apply to reality seems to be consistently agnostic on the surface, but it turns out to be meaningless upon closer examination. First of all, the word 'reality' makes no sense unless it is conceived in a non-contradictory way. But if reality is conceived as not being contradictory, then logic does apply to reality. Secondly, the view necessarily

[1] See Francis Parker, 'The Realistic Position in Religion,' *Religion in Philosophical and Cultural Perspective* (New Jersey: D. Van Nostrand Co. Inc.), pp. 88–9.

[2] By 'logic' here is meant the law of non-contradiction which is at the basis of all logic and thought.

http://journals.cambridge.org Downloaded: 05 Apr 2015 IP address: 122.174.254.155

entails the statement that it is possible that reality is contradictory. Now the word 'possible' has no meaning apart from logic. That is to say, all meaningful possibility is subject to the law of non-contradiction, and to speak of 'possibility' which is not subject to the law of non-contradiction is meaningless. As Wittgenstein observed, what we cannot speak about we must not speak about. For if we do speak what is really unspeakable, then what we speak is meaningless. Now if reality could possibly *be* contradictory and if we cannot meaningfully speak the contradictory, then it follows that we cannot meaningfully speak about the 'possibility' of reality being contradictory. The second alternative is meaningless; it is really no alternative at all.

This leaves us with one meaningful alternative, viz., that logic *must* apply to reality. For the view that logic *can not* apply to reality affirms that logic does apply to reality in the very attempt to deny that it does. And the position that logic *may not* apply to reality is a meaningless assertion, unless logic does apply to the meanings of the terms 'reality' and 'possible' in the sentence which claims that logic may not apply to reality. Therefore, logic must apply to reality.

It should be noticed that the *basis* of the conclusion is not the rational inescapability of the position but the non-affirmability of any other position. The rationally inescapable is the real not because it is rationally inescapable to think this way but because no other position is meaningfully affirmable. In short, to be true something must be meaningful and whatever is not meaningful cannot be true.[1] And if there is only one meaningful position about reality, then this position must be true. That is, the only non-contradictory alternative to contradiction about reality is the truth about reality.[2] And the only non-contradictory statement about reality is that logic does apply to reality.

V. *The ontological argument does not have a rationally inescapable conclusion*

Does the ontological argument actually prove that there are no other logical possibilities than to think of God as necessarily existing and, therefore (with the aid of the additional premise that the logically necessary is the real), that God really exists? A negative answer is indicated, for as some critics have pointed out,[3] it is logically possible (i.e., conceivable) that there is no reality at all. That is, it is *logically* possible that nothing exists or ever has existed including God, even though this may *actually* not be so. It is not inconceivable that there never was, is or will be anything in existence whatsoever. And as long as this is a conceivable or logically possible position,

[1] A meaningless statement could be true by *accident* but not by *intent*.

[2] By 'reality' here is meant something beyond the mere mind and idea thought by that mind, such as a material object or another mind.

[3] Plantinga, *op. cit.* p. 186.

http://journals.cambridge.org Downloaded: 05 Apr 2015 IP address: 132.174.254.155

then it does not follow with logical necessity that God exists. For one logical possibility destroys the logical necessity of its contrary.

Of course, the proponents of the ontological argument may easily reply that it is not logically possible that nothing ever existed, since something obviously does exist (e.g., I exist). In fact, since one's own existence is undeniable, it is not logically possible that nothing exists. For if I exist, then it is contradictory to say that I do not exist.

Two comments are in order on this response. First, it confuses *logical necessity* with *existential undeniability*. Of course, if I exist then it is existentially undeniable that I exist. But it is not logically impossible that I do not exist. That is to say, it is conceivable that I do not exist, even though it is factually untrue. The same is true of every other thing in the world. For, as the proponents of the ontological argument admit, only God is a logically necessary being; the non-existence of everything else is logically possible. Hence, despite the fact that it is actually undeniable that something exists, it is still logically possible that nothing exists. And this logical possibility destroys the logical necessity of the ontological argument. It is not rationally inescapable to think of God as existing, for it is not rationally inescapable that something exists. The non-existence of everything, including God, is a logical possibility.

VI. *The only recourse is to borrow again from the cosmological argument*

There is still another move for the proponents of the ontological argument. They may insist that the conclusion that God exists follows necessarily from the fact that something undeniably exists, even though it does not follow with logical necessity. Certainly this move is allowable, even if it proves to be unsuccessful. But what is important to note here is that once this move is made, the argument is clearly no longer an ontological argument but a cosmological one. It is no longer an argument from logically necessary concepts but from actually undeniable facts. For once one leaves the strictly *a priori* realm of pure thought and imports a premise from the *a posteriori* world of things, then it is no longer an ontological argument. Indeed, it seems to me that the apparent validity which some great minds have seen in the ontological argument is really due to the imported and usually implied premises from the cosmological argument.

Both of the premises needed by the ontological argument to ward off criticisms have a basis in actual existence and not in the realm of mere conceptual or logical necessity. The first premise that the rationally inescapable is the real is true only on the assumption that something is real, i.e., that something exists. For if nothing exists then, of course, it is not necessary to think that something does exist. But since it is undeniably true that some-

CAMBRIDGE JOURNALS

thing exists (e.g., one's self), it is understandable how one might confuse actual undeniability with logical necessity. The fact of the matter is, however, that the rationally inescapable is the real if and only if something is real. And the premise asserting that something is real is existential and not purely conceptual. The second premise borrowed to support the ontological argument is likewise taken from the world of actual fact. It claims that something exists (e.g., I exist). We conclude, then, that by borrowing these premises the ontological argument can successfully handle the common traditional criticisms levelled against it. But once the premises are borrowed, the argument is no longer an ontological one but a cosmological argument which has this form:

(1) Something exists (e.g., I exist).
(2) It is logically necessary to think that something exists necessarily.
(3) Whatever is logically necessary to think of something is actually true.
(4) Therefore, it is actually true that something necessarily exists.

Now the first premise is undeniably true, even though its opposite is logically possible. The third premise is true undeniably, providing that something really exists (which the first premise shows is an undeniable fact). But the second premise is not true because there are other *logical* possibilities. It is not logically necessary to think of something as necessarily existing. It is logically possible that the something which undeniably exists is a dependent or contingent existent and not an independent or necessary existent. That it is logically possible for the something which exists to not exist whatsoever follows from the fact that my non-existence (and the non-existence of everything else in the world) is logically possible. And if the non-existence of what exists is logically possible, then its existence is not logically necessary. There are two ways the proponents of the ontological argument can meet this dilemma. The first way would be to simply *assume* the existence of a necessary existence and beg the whole question of what is to be proved. This would show that the non-existence of something which exists is not possible, but so would it show that the whole ontological argument is unnecessary, since what was to be proven is simply assumed to exist.

The second approach is more fruitful, viz., to borrow one more premise and completely convert to the cosmological argument. As humiliating as this might seem, it appears to be the only way out of invalidity for the ontological argument. The premise is this: every contingent being depends on a necessary being for its existence, or every dependent being depends for its existence on an independent being. This would handle the objection that the something which undeniably exists can be merely a contingent or dependent being. If all dependent beings are grounded in necessary being, then the something which exists must be either that necessary being or else dependent on it.

http://journals.cambridge.org Downloaded: 05 Apr 2015 IP address: 122.174.254.155

VII. *The result is a valid cosmological argument*

Now once all these premises are borrowed, the result is a valid cosmological argument which takes this form:

(1) Something exists.
(2) Whatever exists, exists either contingently or necessarily.
(3) But every contingent existence is dependent on a necessary existence.
(4) Therefore, there is a necessary existence.

Premise one is undeniably true, as has already been argued. Premise two is rationally inescapable; either what exists is dependent for its existence or else it is not dependent for its existence (i.e., it is in-dependant). The third premise needs elaboration. The truth of this premise is undeniable, for to deny that something can be dependent for its existence without there being something on which it is depending is contradictory. How can a being be depending on another for its existence when there no other there upon which it is depending? Likewise, to say that a being is self-dependent for its existence is impossible, for it cannot be causing its own existence. If its existence needs a ground, then it cannot itself be the very ground which it needs. Neither will an appeal to an infinite regress of dependent beings help, for either the whole series is dependent for its existence or independent in its existence. If the latter, then we have arrived at the independent or necessary existence. If the former, then there must be a dependent being outside the series on which it is depending for its existence. It appears, then, that we have a valid cosmological argument for the existence of a necessary being. Of course, we are still some steps away from the identification of this conclusion with the God of Christian theism, but it is a very essential beginning.[1]

[1] For a recent and good defence of the argument, see Bruce Reichenbach, *The Cosmological Argument* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1972).

CAMBRIDGE JOURNALS
http://journals.cambridge.org Downloaded: 05 Apr 2015 IP address: 132.174.254.155